

Highland Rebels: The North Caucasus During the Stalinist Collectivization Campaign

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Abstract

This article investigates one of the most tragic episodes of Soviet history: the collectivization campaign of 1929–30, when the Soviet state's brutal assault on the peasantry plunged the whole country into chaos and provoked large scale rebellions. Resistance was especially fierce in the Muslim dominated parts of the North Caucasus, a notoriously troubled region where Soviet structures were still very weak, and the social cohesion of mountain communities strong. Ultimately, the Red Army and the armed forces of the secret police crushed these rebellions ruthlessly. Yet in Chechnya, Ingushetia, Karachai and parts of Dagestan, they were at least sufficiently violent for the Soviet leadership to decide to suspend their collectivization attempt altogether until the mid-1930s. This is the first study to analyse collectivization in the non-Russian areas of the North Caucasus based on material from Russian archives as well as published document collections containing Soviet secret police reports.

Keywords

Chechnya, collectivization, North Caucasus, Soviet Union, Stalinism, violence

In mid-November of 1929, the Bolshevik leadership approved the program of 'total collectivization' (*sploshchnaia kollektivizatsia*). This marked the beginning of the state's frontal assault on the agrarian economic system and way of life across the entire country. The village in its traditional form was to be abolished. The village assemblies with their councils of elders were banned. Peasants were to become proletarians, to be drafted en masse for work in the kolkhoz, the collective farm. At the

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Exaggeration was involved not only about the situation in Chechnya, but also about the neighbouring areas, where the events in Chechnya apparently were having destabilising effects.

The situation in the Dagestani areas bordering on Chechnya was particularly difficult. Here, the OGPU had already registered unrest after the first major Chechen uprising at the end of 1929.⁹³ However, major confrontations did not erupt in Dagestan until the beginning of April 1930.⁹⁴

In his memoirs, it was the Karsachan region that Exaggeration identified as 'the most affected place in terms of bandits', where practically the entire area under the Karsachan was in the grip of anarchy. In order to stabilise the social order there and to suppress the influence of armed bandit units which controlled the regional capital of Makhach-Khalifa as well as other towns, some regular army units were withdrawn from Chechnya to that sector and redeployed to Karsachan.⁹⁵ Exaggeration stated that if the situation there was not rapidly brought under control, there would be destabilising effects on neighbouring Kabarda, where the security forces had only just done a major operation a few days earlier, in the course of which more than a hundred people had been killed, and bandits had been arrested or had surrendered.⁹⁶

It is impossible to determine with certainty how many people were killed during the events of spring 1930. According to a secret police report, the security forces killed around 200 bandits in Karsachan within 10 days of intense combat operations. Bandits were arrested or surrendered.⁹⁷ The commander of the Red Army's North Caucasian military region, General Ivan P. Belin, reported in April 1930 that the fighting in Karsachan and Chechnya had caused 28 deaths and 28 injuries on the side of the security forces, most of them Red Army soldiers. Altogether, 407 bandits were reported killed in Karsachan. The report gives the number of Chechnya killed as 18, but states that the true number was likely to be much higher, since the Chechnya would often carry away their killed and only bring them behind when they felt it proper due to pressure from the army and so forth.⁹⁸

However, the losses on the side of the secret police and army are also likely to have been higher.

An army report on fighting in the southern part of Dagestan at the end of April and beginning of May stated that the rebels had suffered 46 deaths, while the army had only suffered five injured.⁹⁹

⁹³ Exaggeration stated that the events in Chechnya were particularly dangerous in all respects and that it was necessary to take action to prevent the situation from spreading to the neighbouring areas.

⁹⁴ The report covered the Makhach-Khalifa sector as well as other parts of Dagestan and was made up of the following: 1. In the first half of 1930, the security forces were fighting in the north of Dagestan. 2. In the second half of 1930, the security forces were fighting in the south of Dagestan. 3. In the third half of 1930, the security forces were fighting in the north of Dagestan. 4. In the fourth half of 1930, the security forces were fighting in the south of Dagestan.

⁹⁵ Exaggeration, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, pp. 100–1.

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⁹⁷ Exaggeration, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, pp. 100–1.

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¹⁰⁰ Exaggeration, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, pp. 100–1.